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Former Green Berets Found to Sell Their Skills to Unfriendly Regimes

By PHILIP TAUBMAN
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Dec. 8 — Many former Green Berets, men specially trained by the Army to be masters of the lethal arts, sell their skills to unfriendly governments and repressive regimes, according to Federal law enforcement officials and former members of the force.

These operations, concentrated in Africa, the Middle East and South America, are said by these sources to have involved dozens of the thousands of former Army Special Forces veterans, better known as Green Berets.

These sources said that in many cases men were recruited by fellow veterans who contended that their missions had been sanctioned by the Central Intelligence Agency. In most cases, such contentions were apparently false, but former Green Berets, accustomed to handling sensitive and often unconventional covert tasks for the C.I.A. while on active duty, assumed that the jobs had been approved by the Government.

Libyan Operation Not Unique

The activities of former Green Berets have recently been a subject of increased Federal scrutiny because of disclosures that more than a dozen Special Forces veterans worked in Libya training terrorists in an operation organized by Edwin P. Wilson, a former C.I.A. agent. Mr. Wilson has been indicted on charges of illegally shipping explosives to Libya for use in training terrorists and is believed to be living there.

In another instance, the sources said, former Green Berets were recruited to assassinate opponents of the Nicaraguan Government. Still others, the sources said, trained Chilean intelligence agents in martial techniques.

Additional public attention has been focused on the issue by the case of Eugene A. Tafoya, a Special Forces veteran who worked for Mr. Wilson in Libya. Mr. Tafoya was convicted last week of assault in the shooting of a Libyan student in Fort Collins, Colo., in October 1980. As part of his defense, he contended that he had been working for the C.I.A.

Interviews with more than two dozen Federal officials and former Green Berets suggest that the Libyan operation run by Mr. Wilson was not unique in its use of men who had once served in the Special Forces.

These sources provided details about the operations involving Special Forces veterans in Nicaragua and in Chile. They also cited, without providing details, other overseas operations that employed former Green Berets in Egypt, Zaire, Honduras, Mexico and Argentina.

The sources said that some of these operations, like Mr. Wilson's terrorist training project in Libya, were contrary to American foreign policy interests because they involved providing specialized military expertise to unfriendly governments or to repressive regimes.

United States laws, however, do not prohibit such activities unless the Americans involved become mercenary soldiers, that is, formally enlist in a military service of a foreign nation, Justice Department officials said.

Joseph W. Reap Jr., a State Department press officer, declined to comment on the mercenary activities of former Green Berets and referred a caller to the Justice Department.

A press officer there, John Russell, said: "We have investigated activities of former Green Berets before and found some flaws in the mercenary laws. We found we couldn't go ahead with prosecution. If there is any violation of mercenary laws, we'll make every effort to look into it and enforce it."

The Army, according to a spokesman for the Special Forces, makes no effort to caution active-duty Green Berets about becoming involved in questionable activities when they retire. The spokesman, Lieut. Col. Harold Isaacson, said that the only caution they receive about applying their skills when they leave the military is a warning not to disclose classified material about unorthodox demolition work.

'We Assume' a Career

"We don't talk in terms of getting out of the Army," said Colonel Isaacson, who is based at Special Forces headquarters at Fort Bragg, N.C. "We assume the men who make it through our training program are going to make a career in the Special Forces."

He added that the Special Forces, while embarrassed by the activities of some former members, could do nothing to control how they apply their expertise in weapons, explosives and communications.

"If you want to know what kind of covert operations are going on around the world, the best place to find out is in Fayetteville," said Luke F. Thompson, a former Green Beret who, while on active duty, worked for Mr. Wilson in Libya. "Fayetteville is headquarters for intrigue. It makes Washington look like a finishing school."

A Federal law enforcement official familiar with the activities of Special Forces veterans said that Fayetteville and Honolulu were "switchboards" for clandestine operations.

In 1978, for example, according to the Federal, Army and Green Beret sources, a group of former Green Berets and former Navy unconventional-warfare specialists living in Fayetteville were recruited to work in Nicaragua for Anastasio Somoza Debayle, who was then President, handling counterterrorist jobs, including assassinations of Somoza opponents.

The four men were killed late in 1978 in a plane crash in Nicaragua, according to former colleagues. Details of their mission, however, were recorded in notes kept by friends, who made these documents available and who agreed to be interviewed on the condition that they not be identified.

According to these sources, the four were recruited by a top aide to Mr. Somoza to handle counterterrorist operations, including the infiltration and sabotage of opposition groups. The men also told their friends that they had selected for assassination a senior official in Cuban intelligence who was working in Nicaragua and a Mexican businessman supporting opponents of Mr. Somoza.

Offer Made to C.I.A.

The friends of the four do not know whether the assassinations were actually attempted, and if so, whether they were successful.

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